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ABSTRACT

Australia's Lady Gowrie Child Centres, established in 1940 in state capitals, represent a continuing commitment to early childhood education by the Australian federal government. The six centers were built with an emphasis on outdoor space in inner-city, high-density, industrial, and slum areas where overcrowding and poor living conditions negatively affect children's health. The Lady Gowrie Child Centres were established in the best traditions of the kindergarten movement. They were compensatory and targeted at improving the lot of working class children and their parents. While establishment of the Centres provided models in terms of buildings, equipment, teaching practices, and research functions, they did little to address the dichotomous attitudes towards care and education that had been entrenched in most Australian states since the 1920s. Today the Gowries operate as multipurpose services providing "long day care," family day care, preschool, occasional care, information and referral services, staff development programs, a library and bookshop, and a range of specialized projects that support children with special needs and rural and remote families. (RH)

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[LADY GOWRIE CHILD CARE CENTERS: A BRIEF HISTORY.]

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In 1990 the Lady Gowrie Child Centres, Australia have been celebrating their Golden Jubilee. These six centres established in 1940 in State capital cities are significant in that they represent a continuing commitment to early childhood education by the Australian Federal Government. That they survived through successive political climates and changing ideologies is due substantially to the tenacity of the women who established, staffed and managed the services over the past 50 years.

The history of the Lady Gowrie Child Centres reflects both the changing role of women in Australian society and their contribution to the development of a strong early childhood movement.

The genesis for the centres came from a new group established in 1936 - The National Health and Medical Research Council. The Council was created to raise the standard of health of the community. Standards of child and maternal health were very low at the time with high infant and child mortality rates, due to childhood rheumatism, diphtheria , maternal and child nutrition was generally very poor.

In October 1937 the Prime Minister of Australia announced "an amount of 100,000 pounds is being provided in respect of public health projects especially in relation to the health of women and children."

The Council commended to the Federal Government the plan presented and adopted at the Council by Dr. Vera Scantlebury Brown.

1. The extension of infant welfare activities to include attention to the pre-school child.
2. A model Nursery - Kindergarten Demonstration Centre.
3. Research into the child's needs (especially nutritional) for full development of health.

The Federal Government acknowledged a gap in service between infancy and school age and decided to devote the 100,000 pounds to establish a "Demonstration Centre in each capital city at which not only will the methods for the care and instruction of young children be tested and demonstrated, but also problems of physical growth, nutrition and development will be studied. These centres will be under the direction

of the Commonwealth Department of Health. The co-operation of existing Kindergarten Associations will be sought."

These existing Kindergarten Associations were benevolent charity organisations which in some States had been established as early as 1890's. They operated kindergartens in slum areas of the cities for the 'poor'. The Kindergarten Associations attracted wealthy patrons and the wives of leading businessmen and politicians in each State.

In 1938 the State Kindergarten Associations founded the Australian Association of Pre-School Child Development - an organisation similar to the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

This association had a powerful ally, Her Excellency, Lady Zara Gowrie, the wife of the then Governor General of Australia.

Thus, with encouragement from these wealthy and influential women the government decided to ask the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development to act as its agent to develop the demonstration centres although their operation would be overseen by the Federal Department of Health. Lady Zara Gowrie was asked to lend her name to the centres in appreciation of her commitment to the welfare of young children. Between 1939 - 1940 Her Excellency opened each centre at a formal public gathering. The Kindergarten Unions in each State established a Lady Gowrie Child Centre Committee to manage the centres, and promote their work and importance to the general community. The Federal Officer of the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development was made responsible for the supervision of the centres. This position was funded by the Federal Government to ensure that the services were co-ordinated and developed uniformly across the States.

The first Federal Officer of the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development was Miss Christine Heinig, an American Early Childhood Educationalist who had been nominated by Columbia University at the request of the Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria to come to Australia in

1936 as the Principal of the Kindergarten Training College in Kew, Victoria.

Christine Heinig's influence on the early childhood movement of Australia was great indeed. The training institutions were focussed on the teachings of Froebel and the more mystical notions of early childhood. It was Christine Heinig who introduced to Australia study of child development, child psychology and the child as an individual rather than as a member of a social class. Christine Heinig lived in Australia from 1936 - 1946.

Medical research was oversighted by the Commonwealth Department of Health from 1940 - 1947 when the government suspended the Gowries role in the collection of statistics concerning physical growth and development. "Health Record of the Lady Gowrie Centres" - a record of the findings of the research into health, diet and posture of children was published in 1945.

The six centres were built with an emphasis on outdoor space, in inner-city high density industrial and slum areas where overcrowding and poor living conditions would be likely to offer a negative environment for healthy child growth. Thus the Lady Gowrie Child Centres were established on the best traditions of the kindergarten movement - compensatory and targeted at improving the lot of the working class child and his/her parents.

The Sydney Gowrie was incorporated into a major slum re-development project and has provided a child care service to families in this low income subsidised housing estate for 50 years. The father of our first pupil still lives opposite the centre.

The system of child study developed by the Lady Gowrie Directors and the National Director, based on the observation of the individual child,offered an Australian-based model for other centres "conducting its work on child development lines."

As the State Kindergarten Unions were also involved with the training colleges the Gowries became (and remain) centres of study for their

students and also students of other disciplines such as medicine, dentistry and architecture, utilised the centre's demonstration programme.

Whilst the establishment of Lady Gowrie Child Centres provided model centres in terms of their purpose-specific buildings and equipment, their teaching practices and research functions, they did little to address the dichotomous attitudes to care and education that had been entrenched in most States in Australia since the 1920's.

Apart from a short period during World War Two when the Melbourne Gowrie operated as a war time nursery for female munitions workers, the Centres operated as pre-schools until 1984.

In 1955, 1977 and 1988 the Federal Government conducted major reviews of the operation of the Gowries and each time they survived with increased financial support. The establishment of the Gowries heralded Federal commitment to early childhood services. However, it took another 32 years for the government to become involved in wide spread funding of child care services.

New terms of reference established by the Federal Government in 1977 set the Gowries on a path, which oriented them to the provision of advisory, resource and demonstration support targeted at assisting the development of federally funded day care services. From 1982 - 1990 the Federal Government created over 166,000 child care places Australia-wide. Some are centre-based, others home-based or mobile services for rural and remote areas.

In 1990 the Gowries operate as multi-purpose services providing long day care, family day care, pre-school, occasional care, information and referral services, staff development programmes, library, bookshop and a range of specialised projects that support children with special needs, and rural and remote families. The centres are still co-ordinated nationally by the Australian Early Childhood Association and many resources are planned and developed collaboratively. The centres have a strong tradition of service to parents and children in their local community, have acted as demonstrators of quality early childhood

programmes for early childhood students for 50 years, have contributed to the body of research on early childhood in Australia and continue to provide direct and tangible support to early childhood service providers.

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